

THE YOUNG RICHARD CHARLES FROESCHNER: EMERGENCE OF A PROFESSIONAL ENTOMOLOGIST

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We, the three brothers of Richard Charles Froeschner, have gathered together to write an appreciation of Dick in his earlier years as a budding entomologist. From that early, deep interest in insects and natural history he has never wavered.

Born in Chicago, Illinois, March 8, 1916, Dick is the second son of Paul D. Froeschner and Helen Kaltenbach, who came to the United States from Germany as children. Our parents had little education, were poor, frugal, and steeped in a strong "work ethic." This was passed on to the next generation, and seeing the opportunities that existed in their new homeland, they insisted on high school educations for us: Paul, the eldest by seven years; Richard; Robert; and William, the youngest by five years. Paul, an avid reader of scientific subjects, became the mentor for his brothers in their developing interest: Richard in entomology; Robert in herpetology; and William in botany. The younger two of us entered the ministry as our profession but little did our parents dream that their second son would emerge a Ph.D. and a well-known entomologist.

Early in life, the four of us became interested in natural history. Each spring and summer we collected and displayed animals in a backyard "zoo." A title board tacked to the grape arbor, which shielded cages from the hot sun, bore the words "F. N. C. Zoological Gardens." "F.N.C." was based on the first letters of the ill-defined "Froeschner's Nature Club." Residents of the sundry home-made cages, bath tubs, and fenced areas were largely reptiles, though other animals appeared from time to time. A young full-grown coati-mundi, which entertained the premises for a season or two, was an expert in rooting out the termites and "water bugs" that inhabited the wooden retaining walls beneath the fences. The animal with the longest residency was a red-faced rhesus monkey, given to the Froeschners because no one else wanted the cantankerous critter. We remember with a smile the four-foot alligator that escaped from its enclosure one night, had its picture on the front page of the morning paper, and had to be reclaimed from the local police station by two sheepish brothers; the large litter of common water snakes that slipped through the cracks in their mother's enclosure and caused mild havoc in the neighborhood; and the quarrelsome rhesus, turned loose from her chain to evacuate reluctant children from the "zoo" at closing time.

Inspired by the then current and popular jungle films by Martin and Osa Johnson and "Bring 'em back alive" Frank Buck, the Froeschner Nature Club discovered its own natural paradise in a superb woodland and savannah area near Moline Creek,

not too far from home. Now the area is overgrown with residences, commerce, and even a shopping center. Then it was an area rich in the flora and fauna of Missouri; treks through the humid undergrowth were often rewarded with discoveries of clearings where butterflies of every description met at moist clay watering holes.

In those years youth in the Walnut Park area of St. Louis showed such interest in animal life that the local branch library reserved several shelves for often-borrowed books on reptiles and insects. One of our associates in "the Park" was the late Richard Grossenheider. He became a well-known animal artist whose works continue to appear in publications and displays. A hardware store even "contracted" to have one of its display windows decorated for successive weeks with woodland scenes and living animals. All went well until a cottonmouth or water moccasin somehow escaped from the window. Customers who learned of the mishap were reluctant to enter the premises. Finally, when the owner discovered the venomous snake lying near the crank that he used daily to open and lock the safe, all future displays were cancelled immediately and replaced by more traditional inert hardware.

While Dick demonstrated an all-inclusive curiosity about living things, insects intrigued him the most. Paul recalls how Dick, at age 3 plus, was noticeably attracted to insects felled by coal oil lamps at home; further, how at the age of five, he was fascinated by the jerky antics of "sand bees" as they kicked grains from cracks in exterior walls of the house and stuffed and sealed immobilized insects into the "little rooms" where they had laid their eggs. At age 12 he made his first butterfly net from a broomstick, a piece of stout barrel-stave wire, and ten-cents worth of cheese cloth. Later, after we saved sufficient nickels and dimes by regularly walking the three miles home from high school, a sophisticated metal take-apart-for-travel net was ordered from a Chicago firm. It was a proud day when the contrivance arrived. Only after the net was carefully screwed together did we take turns making practice fore- and backhand thrusts through the air.

Another net was added to the "tools" when Dick discovered a discarded tennis racket at the local dump. A remarkably sturdy instrument was produced in a few hours using the frame, scissors, string, needle, and some sack cloth. The cloth was colored green with the then popular Rit dye. The finished product was called a "beating net," an appropriate name because it was designed to thrash one's way through fields of weeds, netting insects (and leaves!) from their hiding places in the dense growth. We have vivid recollections of Dick vigorously whipping weedy patches, then squatting at the end of each sweep to carefully unfold the net laid across his knees. Ever-present killing jars, carried in the twin pockets of his long-sleeved chambray shirt, darted to and from their places as specimens were harvested. The captives not desired were permitted to go their way unharmed. Neither summer heat, angry wasps, hungry mosquitoes, nor Missouri chiggers could stop his forays. Indeed, so many insects were collected in this manner that years later he was still "working" on them.

A word about those killing jars deserves mention—they, too, were homemade. An important ingredient was cyanide. One year, Paul, in an effort to get Dick "just the birthday gift he needed," approached the druggist with a request for some cyanide "eggs." The druggist hesitated a bit, saying cyanide was hardly a fitting birthday gift, but he finally agreed to order the lethal stuff because he was acquainted with the family's peculiar habits and felt reasonably comfortable with the request. Those were

the years when local merchants knew their customers and there were few restrictions on dangerous substances.

Still another tool designed by Richard was dubbed a "grubber." A rusty steel bar about the length of a crowbar was heated so that one extremity became a three-inch bend. The end of the bend was hammered and filed to make a broad screwdriver-like tip. With it, fallen rotting logs could be hacked and pried open to reveal their contents, with mice often dislodged in the process. On one occasion some white-footed deer mice became part of one winter's remnant zoo in the family basement. Another time four delicate flying squirrels made a hasty exit from their nest high in a dead tree that was being prodded at the base. It is difficult now to recall how many species of ants, borers, roaches, and other creatures were gathered from such "grub-bings." Unforgettable, though, was the first sight of immense sound-producing beetles and their huge grubs. Subsequent research revealed that the scientific name was *Passalus cornutus* and that the raspy sound they emitted was a primitive form of communication required in their deep, dark habitat. Dick's expanding interest in the six-legged creatures led him to secure yucca plants for the family yard to attract yucca moths. The experiment succeeded and there was excited rejoicing among us.

Another quite different collecting practice comes to mind. At dusk, in a wooded area, a mixture of stale beer and spoiled jelly was painted heavily on a line of tree trunks. At intervals during the night, with the aid of lanterns and a flashlight, the trees were inspected. Interesting assortments of insects were found feeding on the sticky, smelly substance. During one night's watch, cold winds began to blow atop a high hill overlooking Grafton, Illinois, and two shivering brothers were forced to button their collars, lower their sleeves, roll up in their light summer blankets, and crouch in a hole that looked very much like a grave dug but never used. The experience disturbed no one but the shivering boys.

Other incidents, however, led to different consequences. The landlady of Dick's student residence found a sack of rattlesnakes beneath his bed (they were to be sent to Elmhurst College for his brother Bob's student lecture on reptiles). Kindly, Mrs. Cooper confronted him with an ultimatum: "Either the snakes go, or you and the snakes go together." He quickly found a different storage space! On another occasion, our mother scolded him about keeping tarantulas caged in a flimsy ice cream carton. On yet another, this while in army basic training during a ten-minute rest break, the sergeant, after observing Richard turning over rocks and logs to study the creatures beneath, made some spicy comments questioning the recruit's sanity.

Along with the collecting, of course, came the need for "spreading" boards and storage cases. In the depression years there was no money to buy them, so wooden fruit boxes were "liberated" from grocery store trash burners and, on Dad's work bench, the slats and ends were turned into serviceable items. As an extremely resourceful person, few obstacles stood long in Dick's way.

John Henry Comstock's *An Introduction to Entomology* became Dick's handbook. A worn copy of that volume still resides on a bookshelf in the old family home.

Bob's purchase of a 1928 Model A Ford coupe, a set of inexpensive tools, tire patches, and baling wire facilitated field excursions to more distant places. When Bob announced plans to enter Elmhurst College (near Chicago), Dick thumbed his way home from the University of Missouri to make an exchange: his old worn Gladstone suitcase for his brother's old worn Ford—"Even Steven!" Subsequently,

Dick's collecting trips around Missouri were limited only by the need for major repairs (most of which he could do himself) and money for gasoline. In the university years, he made friends with other young scientists. One, later to become widely known for his research into the history and ways of native American Indians, was Dr. Carl Chapman. The two frequently traveled together on field expeditions. Another friend, whose name we never knew, was doing research on intestinal parasites of skunks. Dead skunks found on the road were scooped into the car, taxied back to Columbia, and deposited in a laboratory refrigerator until the doctoral candidate could examine them. Even repugnant odors were no major deterrent. In Dick's relentless quest for insects, he frequently turned over the bodies of horses and cows left in fields to decay. Beneath them were rove beetles and other carrion eaters surrounded by a "distinctive" atmosphere. During college vacations, Dick worked a summer each in the Dutch elm disease program and on Japanese beetle research. Traps used in the latter work gathered a number of species other than the Japanese pest, which became his merely for the taking.

School teachers along the way were of great assistance to Dick. Miss Lenzen, an eighth grade teacher, encouraged his curiosity through conversation and suggested reading material. Dr. John Prather, a humble but demanding high school biology teacher, deeply impressed the Froeschners. At his urging they helped form an after-school dissection club, which provided advanced learning and invaluable hours of association with this remarkable, though little-known, zoologist. Most helpful, however, was a Miss Mary McCarty, another high school biology teacher. Recognizing Dick's potential, she acted to further promote it. She drove him to the University of Missouri, introduced him to the biologists, and personally negotiated hard-to-get grants with a depression-plagued administration, all of which allowed him to begin his career as an entomologist.

It is unfortunate that none of these people lived to see their protege honored with this issue of the *Journal of the New York Entomological Society* celebrating his seventieth birthday. It is probable that his good experiences with these helpful people gave him insight into the value of taking a personal interest in his own students. In 1958, while Associate Professor in Zoology at Montana State University, he was voted Distinguished Teacher of the Year; this honor carried a certificate and cash award. Many of his students must still look back with appreciation for the knowledge he shared and the manner in which he helped them grow.

A few sentences must be written about his wife and family. Dick's wife, Elsie Herbold Froeschner, also the child of a German immigrant family, met and married Dick while at the University of Missouri. To their marriage, Elsie brought her own extensive knowledge of the natural sciences and enviable artistic skills. Her accurate, detailed drawings have greatly increased the value of Dick's publications. Her sketches regularly appear on the couple's Christmas greetings, and her paintings have graced the walls of friends and relatives fortunate to have received them.

Elsie's consideration as a wife and mother has enriched Dick's life in ways that freed him to pursue his career with devotion seldom achieved. Two daughters, Ellen and Kay, now grown, and two grandchildren are treasured parts of their lives.

In this public recognition of his seventieth birthday, all who have assisted him or learned from him, can join his family in being proud of their association with an entomologist extraordinary, Dr. Richard Charles Froeschner.